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ABSTRACT

This discussion of the evolution of the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation (SSR) begins with a report issued in 1953 by a federal commission which strongly influenced the first 15 years of Swiss television. Noting that the Swiss government adopted most of the proposals made in the report, this paper indicates some of the decisions that the Federal Council took in the period from 1953 to 1981. A critique of a report issued in 1985, "The SSR on its way to the 90s," is then presented. This report is characterized as an essay in prospective strategy, which synthesizes in some 40 pages the thoughts of the General Director, Leo Schurmann, and concludes with four theses that purport to be a realistic and resolutely voluntaristic vision of the future of the SSR. Some hypotheses are offered on points that "SSR-90" does not address, and the paper concludes by situating the report in the wider ideological and technological context in which it takes its place. Most of the nine references provided are in French. (CGD)

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PIERRE-HENRI ZOLLER

THE SWISS BROADCASTING CORPORATION (1953-1985)

FROM VIRTUE TO REALISM

PAPER PRESENTED TO THE 1986 INTERNATIONAL

TELEVISION STUDIES CONFERENCE

LONDON

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

In November 1985, an important document was made public by the managing body of the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation (SSR) and since that time has aroused extensive debate within the professional and institutional organs which make up the corporation (Managing Committee,Central Committee, and the regional authorities).

"The SSR on its way to the 90s" is basically a study of the future of the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation in the new competitive environment of the electronic media market.

This essay in "prospective strategy", which synthesizes in some forty pages the thoughts of its General Director, concludes with four theses, which purport to be a realistic and resolutely voluntaristic vision of the future of the SSR (1).

The document, which is at the same time the manifesto and testament of the General Director, nearing the end of his mandate, bears witness to his exceptional personality. Leo Schürmann, a lawyer, professor, parlementarian and former director of the National Bank, is one of the major personalities of the Swiss political scene.

In this paper, we should like to put this "prospective strategy" in the context of the evolution of the SSR, our starting point being another document which was also a manifesto and work of reference, but some thirty years ago.

A 1953 federal commission gave its view of the future of Swiss television in a report which strongly influenced the first 15 years of the institution and the Swiss government adopted most of its proposals. We shall indicate some of the decisions that the Federal Council took in the period which followed from 1953 to 1981. This "Discourse of Power" will lead us to a critical presentation of "SSR-90", and to some hypotheses on the points that the document passes over "in silence". We shall then attempt to situate it in the wider ideological and technological context in which it takes its place.

THE "FLEXIBLE RESPONSE" OF THE PUBLIC SERVICE

In 1983 the monopoly of the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation was broken by two decisions of the Swiss governement (Federal Council) : one was to grant some forty concessions to local radio stations which would rely on income from publicity, and the other was to authorize the setting-up of a paying television channel by satellite.

Preceded by the publication of a voluminous report by a "Federal Commission for a global conception of the media" (1982), these facts indicated a desire to restructure the national system of audio-visual media in conformity with the wishes of private promoters and right wing political circles.

Thus, the competitive tendencies of the new environment of communications spread their effects in Switzerland as in most countries of Western Europe.

In this situation, the SSR led by its dynamic General Director, the Christian-Democrat Leo Schürmann, adopted a strategy qualified as a "flexible response". The SSR, thus wants to make its influence felt on as many terrains as possible as a partner, or as a leader or as a reference.

This implies a policy of efficiency of enterprise, the developing of co-production and increased expertize in the news reporting and entertainment sectors, in short, better "productivity".

This strategy was implicitely opposed already in 1982 by the General Director - a year after his appointment - to that which would mean a "retraction of the SSR to programmes which are in the service of the community, which fulfil the cultural mission and which take minorities into account ... such a strategy would be synonymous with resignation all along the line...."

Formulated in these terms, the alternative appears to sum up the new course of the public radio and television service. It means that the SSR has chosen - could it do otherwise ? - to fight on the ground marked out by its liberal "adversaries", opposing the dynamic and pluralist virtues of free enterprise to the bureaucratic inertia, subject to ideological partiality and restrictiveness, of the public service, readily qualified as a "monopoly".

This course while remaining faithful to the specific programing responsability of a public television service. The margin of manoeuvre is very narrow. The choice could indeed be framed as "sauver les meubles ou sauver son âme", or "save one's soul, or save what can be saved of one's own".

1953 : FOR VIRTUOUS TELEVISION

> "Few countries have been opposed to television as much as Switzerland. Apart from some misgivings emanating from business circles, the Press and the Cinema, this opposition arose mainly from educationists and intellectuals, who claimed that TV would have a bad influence on the people and the family. In order to dissipate these fears the Federal Council instituted in 1952 a "Federal Commission for the study of cultural questions related to television" (2)

Some sectors of opinion did not look upon the development of this source of entertainment and potential changes in habits with a favourable eye and press organisations were inclined to restrain and if possible control the new media, but others were more decided, beginning with the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation. Realists pointed to the fact that foreign television programmes were entering the country.

It is in this context that the Commission mandated by the Federal Council endeavoured to define in some fifty pages divested of triumphalism the project of a future Helvetic television service, consonant with the former history of the public broadcasting service. The general spirit of this report was to harmonize with the government's lasting vigilance and continuity of action, as we are to show.

Made up of 33 people, the commission represented an elite which was both conservative and "enlightened". Youth associations, women's organisations, delegates of the cantonal and federal political authorities, the press, the churches, the state education authority, professional and cultural organisations and the SSR itself were able to put forward their points of view.

In September 1953, after 11 months' work, the final report was transmitted to the government. It is essentially made up of "guidelines" which relate to some twelve "domains". These domains, chosen as the most important, and fitted with their "guidelines", are presented in an order which bears witness to the decreasing importance alloted to them by the commission.

Television is thus examined in relationship with :

> the family - the younger generation - the woman
> welfare services - the church - politics - the
> working man - the economy - agriculture and
> peasant culture - science and engineering - the
> cinema - the theatre - sport

Very clearly this report aimed at putting the coming television in the service of an ideal, christian, middle-class and virtuous Switzerland, proud of its almost direct democracy.

The television that the commissioners proposed was to be virtuous to the point of rigorism, to be used with caution and a good deal of discretion.

One might judge from the following examples :

Opening : "The commission brings to the forefront the protection of <u>the family</u>" (p.11) of which the television service "is to emphasize the social, moral and spiritual value" (idem).

Secondly in importance comes the relationship of television with the younger generation, an area "which was the object of very careful study", at the end of which "strong scepticism" was expressed. The wish of the commission, therefore, was that care be taken to "supress as much as possible the harmful effects on the fascinating action of moving pictures upon young and adolescent children" (p.13). Programmes for the young, limited in number, were to privilege the education of mothers, be accompanied as far as possible by educational tasks, and not be broadcast on Saturday afternoons so as not to compete with associative activities of youth organisations.

Care was to be taken in addition so that "the popularity enjoyed by any one kind of programme will not serve as a measure of appreciation of its quality" (p.30).

With regards to programmes for women, we might note a surprising proposal which could appear to fall in line with contemporary radical feminism : "It would appear desirable to have all television programmes commented upon by persons expressing both male and female viewpoints" (p.30)

Politics come in fifth position of importance, in the main to underline the dangers of television to democracy, in that it may either weaken the capacity of individual judgment by its uniformizing action or, even worse, its attraction may cause individuals to become more isolated from one another. But the greatest danger in this domain would be to see programmes "represent politicians as play-actors and make politics appear to be a game ..."(p.35). Elsewhere, the report asks of television that it should educate and cultivate the working man, valorize agriculture and peasant culture, draw attention to the advantages of a healthy economy, always with reserve and discretion and always with the prime aim of avoiding facility and futility and not to induce the temptation to watch television passively.

Lastly, on the subject of sport, the commission drew attention to the danger of so called "spectacular sport" threatening to draw away the majority of people from taking part in active sports ..."

The report concluded by revealing two tendencies within the group without stating precisely how big they were and whom they were made up. Thus, for the majority of the commission, television was not only a technical advance but also a "valuable cultural institution ... technical inventions are not in themselves good or bad, everything depends upon the use which is made of them" (p.23).

The minority, on the other hand, put forward the hypothesis that in the long run television would more probably be inherently perverse in its effects, easily leading to superficiality and inevitably embodying a "tendency toward intellectual management". The report ended by recalling the precautions to take to avoid these dangers and that the priciple according to which "the popularity enjoyed by any one type of programme is not to serve as measure of its appraisal quality" (3).

1931, THE DISCOURSE OF POWER

> In no way is this a history of communication systems creating a new society or new social conditions. The decisive and earlier transformation of industrial production, and its new social forms, which had grown out of a long history of capital accumulation and working technical improvements, created new needs but also new possibilities, and the communications systems, down to television, were their intrinsic outcome (4)
>
> R. WILLIAMS

Observation of the evolution of uses of the media is a valuable preliminary to any debate on social communication and its technical mediation. Coming after the laboratory and the prototypes leading to the industrial stage, the material development of techniques is accompanied by policy debates and strategies which orient new techniques in the social field. These conflicting discourses functions as a regulating mechanism and generally it is the prerogative of the political authority to make a summary and appraisal of the power relationships they express, a power discourse, which serves as a basis for future legislative action, in liberal democracies with market economies.

In Switzerland, radio and television have developed over a period of 60 years. The integration of the two media to national life has been realised cautiously and empirically, paying due respect to political and economical forces, and also social equilibria, which conforms with the Confederation's tradition.

In November 1931, the Swiss Government (Federal Council) presented a comprehensive report to the Parliament (Federal Assembly) on the subject of broadcasting in the country.

There had been some limited experiences in broadcasting for a few of the large towns since 1923. From the beginning of broadcasting by private stations, the Swiss had rapidly taken over control by means of its prerogative relating to telegraphic and telephonic communications. The 1931 report made it clear that in Switzerland "all broadcasting organisations depended upon the state monopoly".

Between 1923 and 1930, the number of receiver licences reached 100'000. It was at that time that the authorities judged it necessary to define the requirements relating to programmes in a legal form. Up to that time they had remained very general. The principal broadcasting stations joined together to form the single "Swiss Broadcasting Corporation" (SSR), which was in the terms of the 1931 report, the only holder in future of the right to broadcast.

The essential points of this first Charter have remained unchanged up to the present. Guidelines relating to programmes have however been re-examined and brought up to date in several occasions and have become known as "Article 13" of the present SSR concession. This clause constitutes the basic norm for reference and appraisal of the vocation or mission assigned to the institution for radio and television stations of all three national languages.

Extract of the concession of 1931 :

> "The broadcasting service is to pursue ideal aims, while safeguarding national interests. It must operate in a spirit of impartiality .."
>
> (...) "Programme composition and the quality of production must be such as to satisfy good taste and to contribute to general education. When devising programmes, one must observe principles of economy, remain within reasonable limits and settle expenditure from available funds".

Extract of the 1982 concession, Article 13 :

> "1. The programmes broadcast by the SSR are to defend and develop the cultural values of the country and contribute to the spiritual, moral, religious, civic and artistic betterment of the general public. It must provide as objective, extensive and rapid information as possible and reply to the need for entertainment. The programmes must serve the interests of the country, strenghten national unity and concord and contribute to international understanding".

The recommendations of 1953 relating to television programmes is an articulation between these two versions of the norm.

During the half-century 1931 to 1981, the number of radio licences grew from 120'000 to 2.2 million, the number of the one for television from the figure of 10'000 in 1955 to nearly 2 million. For a population of 6.2 million inhabitants, a saturation threshold was reached. This development witnessed accelerated phases marked out by the state power taking position. If we exclude punctual interventions, the Federal Council intervened in a specific manner on ten occasions :

As in 1931 by means of "messages" introducing bills for legislation, and by 3 "reports" which synthesized the situation at the time (5). In these 432 pages we find descriptions of developments which have taken place at various stages of the history of radio and television, and also formulations of policy, which affirm the will to orient the media in function of the higher demands of democracy and the rule of law.

As a whole, despite the caution which characterizes the work of their various and anonymous authors within the state administration, these documents constitute an overall discourse which is richly informative in its continuity and breaks.

Firstly, the technical developments of telecommunications are seen as a necessary part of scientific advance in the modern age. Essentially heralding progress, the new instrument of television is considered cautiously and even circumspectly (1951, 1954, 1955, 1956). "Technological determinism" (although this expression is not explicitly used) is presented as an unavoidable phenomenum. One should adapt to it as well as possible, but be capable of mastering future developments, proclaimed as still more efficient but cause for concern socially.

The discourse on ethical and cultural values is present and insistant throughout showing an almost sole desire to put television in the service of "good taste", to "elevate culture" and generally to futher the level of instruction of the greatest number. This both idealistic and elitist orientation is proclaimed during the experimental phase of television in particular (53-57). Presented as an instrument which is "neither good nor bad in itself", it finds itself invested with a moral, educative and civic vocation.

Thus we see that the 1953 "White Paper" was adopted by the Government in its spirit, and, in fact, word for word in certain areas. It is not surprising that national values, above all those of the past (heritage, customs, traditions) were to be preserved and shown by means of scrupulous respect for the cultural, artistic, linguistic, religious and spiritual diversity of the country.

Lastly, an ultimate justification did not fail to appear, that of the defense of national identity in relation to the outside world. Faced by the "invasion by foreign transmissions which threaten to submerge the country", to preserve its identity, Switzerland had to give itself the means of self-representation by the mastering and broadcasting of sound and pictures.

In a second period, clearly after the message of 1973, the legal and constitutional questions relating to the freedom of radio and television assert themselves. Of central importance, and a complex notion, the freedom of the media is presented as made up of several other freedoms : of the receivers of programmes, of the makers of programmes, and of the broadcasting institution.

This problematic is prolonged, in the last message (1981), to the new techniques of telecommunication which in their forthcoming extensions are presented as a determining factor of societal change.

Strangely enough, in the texts prior to 1981, radio and television are only occasionally looked upon as agents of economic development. Future sources of income are tactically underlined (licences, taxes) and so are the indirect advantages for industry and tourism. They scarcely go further than that.

Lastly, as regards the initial aims of an ethical and cultural nature, the functions of "relaxation" and "entertainment", always mentioned last during the first twenty years as a sort of compromise which was unavoidable and unfortunate in its futility, progressively acquire another status. One witnesses a shake-up in the recognised "functions" of radio and television. The ideal "missions" of the first period have been relegated to last place, in favour of news reporting and "entertainment".

The 1973 message is revealing in this respect (p.41) :

> In view of the number of constraints imposed upon working life and those of daily life, psychologists and doctors consider it as useful to be relaxed by the collective means of communication. That is why those responsible for these means and the supervisory authorities must attach all the necessary importance to this function. One should also take into consideration the fact that opinions about what is good in this domain widely diverge ..."

In conclusion to this evocation of the framework drawn up by the discourse of state power, we might add this comment by a jurist which illustrates our observations from another standpoint :

> The policy of the audio-visual media in Switzerland can be defined as a non-voluntaristic policy, more centred upon the police than upon communication, and concerned with preserving the dominant ideology and oscillating between news report and entertainment" (6)

Understandably in this context the personality of the present director has shown itself to be determinant. The initiative came from inside the institution and was strongly asserted.

After the age of the aristocratic brand of humanism of the previous General Director, Stelio Molo, Leo Schürmann was determined to imprint his mark upon the SSR as a "manager" and a "stateman". It did not fail to occur.

The institution was very quickly able to size-up the new "guiding-image" already defined by Mr. Schürmann in 1981, which he still qualify today as "quite adequate reference to define, with article 13 of the concession, the "programme mission" of the SSR".

The reading of the speeches and analyses of Leo Schürmann these last few years reveals the consistent thinking of a man of action setting out his project point by point. One observes the defining of a policy o "business efficency" set in a politico-judicial framework of market economy, which is to achieve a combination of ideal objectives.

These objectives, defined from the outside in their generality (concession, article of the constitution, and soon the new law on radio and television), leave however an undeniable margin of autonomy to the responsible institution in their interpretation and realisation.

Leo Schürmann latest Paper provides the best illustration, as we are now to see.

"SSR-90" : BEYOND REALISM

> "As a result of the Enlightenment we do not find around us. the emancipated individual Kant and the other thinkers of the Enlightenment hoped for, but the Golden Calf of the Old Testament"
>
> Max FRISCH

"The SSR on its way to the 90's" (hereafter "SSR-90") is based upon a problematic of increasing competition which is asserted as irresistible, competition from every direction on audio-visual markets on a local, national and international scale. This "approach to problems" determines the perspective of "SSR-90" in its essential : how, in such a context, to resist and maintain "in its totality and in the long run the mission of the SSR ?".

After devoting itself to a study of "the market of electronic media of communication" (p.5) and by a sectorial examination of supply, both of techniques and contents, the Paper situates the SSR in its context :

> "The future situation of supply on audio-visual markets will be characterised by a confrontation between the public service and private promoters. At stake will be audiences, programmes and financial resources. It It will not be journalistic competition such as the one carried on by the press and the electronic media, but a confrontation which will take place on the audio-visual market itself" (p.13)

On the basis of this observation, it is the "demand" of known and potential audiences which is examined. Given this hypothesis of economic growth confirming the main trend observable today, demand is characterized by an increase in purchasing power and time given over to the media whether it be lot private or public use, professional and learning or for leisure and "pleasure". The responsability of the SSR is clearly engaged by this situation :

> "Whereas in the past, demand had to depend upon a limited supply, henceforth it will be the suppliers who will have to bend to the needs of a variety of demanders. A differentiation of supply is going to occur automatically, and also in respect of quality. The organisms of public service have a role as a leader to play in this regard, as only they are able to prevent a collapse of the general level, by serving as a model and standard of quality for the audio-visual market of a country" (p.21)

Looking into the future of the SSR, Leo Schürmann defines his strategy in three points : concentration, limitation, intensification. He examines the implication of these for the radio and then for television. In particular one might note the following elements :

On the basis of some "key-factors" regarding listening, the radio should tend towards a "full-supply", that is to say it should aim at every moment at all of the potential and available audience. This supposes making the public loyal ("fidelisation") by a simplified programme grid made more functional. In concrete terms, the Paper suggests doing away with "unharmonized" elements or those considered as "non-radiogenic" ...

To that is added the proposal of separating radio and television institutionally in view of their functions which are judged as being more and more specific : the position of "leader of reference" for the TV, based on a delimitated choice of objectives; policy of maximum presence for the radio, for which the quantitative would appear to prevail over the qualitative.

As regards television, the role of reference and standard of quality of the public service is resolutely affirmed, with its existing advantages in this role (experience, competence, national identity, relative financial security in relation to viewing numbers). Television is therefore to tend towards a strategy of "dominant supply", for which one finds more clearly the key-notes of "concentration, limitation, intensification".

This Paper establishes therefore competition as the principal constraint. This postulate - both fact and hypothesis in the market logic thus favoured - delimits the respective weight of constraints, which one might qualify as secondary, in the rest of the analysis, in short, the public service missions !

It is on this hierarchy of constraints and on its consequences that the important part of debate should in our view appear to centre, with two preliminary observations : it is not a matter of denying competition as a new given fact which in the main is beyond the control of the SSR, though one needs to question critically the developments Leo Schürmann foresees, that is sustained growth of production and of the economy, in particular the sector of the leisure industry and the "communicational" tertiaries.

Consequently, and this is our second observation, it seems that a reversal of the logic underlying "SSR-90" can be proposed, and the primacy of the public service over all other consideration be asserted. It follows that it is indeed the defence of the public service which appears as principal constraint, tactically ans strategically, not only in its existence, but also in its "essence".

The implications of such a choice are many. Here are some of them :

- the concepts of "majority audience - minority audience" are no longer valid as such and require redefining according to new criteria;

- programmes and types of programmes with little audience, but that conform to the SSR's mission must not only be maintained, but renewed in their form, their character, their objectives;

- systematic and imaginative thought should be given to listing programme domains which are at present neglected or fallen in disuse, or again never considered in a coherent fashion.

These few directions for research should also take into consideration an evaluation of the forms of influence and interactivity which can be realized between audience and producers, whether it be by institutional channels and procedures (local broadcasting authorities), informal ones (meetings or by post), technical ones (telephonic or telematic interactivity, going beyond the present surveys and audimetry).

Research should also be undertaken in respect of programmes themselves : internal pluralism, openings for outside producers, extending public access programmes. The "language" itself of television should also certainly be questioned and explored, to loosen the grip and influence of the "advertising model" on general programmes.

Lastly, exploring the "Dutch path", that is to say, time on the air attributed to a variety of associations, might be found to be interesting for Switzerland (7).

One should use therefore to the best advantage the contribution of the "SSR on its way to the 90's" to find matter for more open debate on the future of Swiss society and its media, so as to develop alternatives to those -(all too) "natural"- which are made here.

The supply of mediatised communication imposes its own law upon stifled and diverted social demands which follow the route marked out for it by the industries of culture, by those of "show-biz" and insignificance, qualified recently as "industry of pleasure and seduction".

To this front of "immaterial" ideology is added that of the "material" ideology of technology, imposing its choices as ineluctable thus neutralizing any debate on its finalities. The process would be less a matter of conspiring than of mystifying, as Jacques Ellul suggested in 1977 in his remarkable indictment against "Le système technicien" (8).

From "modern and efficient" education to publicity and scientific power, Ellul denounces the conformity to technical advance, or "conformisation technicienne", which is at work and "whose true result is always to counter spontaneous reactions against the technical system, to integrate more fully each viewer or consumer and to get them to work in the direction of technical advancement" (9)

Technical means and economic strategies today dominate the capacities for innovation of authors, creators and "workers" of the media. Isn't "small" any longer at all "beautiful" ?

Between local radio and TV threatened with anemia or success of the meaningless and multi-million structures on a continental scale, is a "communication void" not in the process of establishing itself paradoxically, as one could speak of a "social void" under the joint ascendancy of State and market ?

If one thinks of the debate inaugurated in the 30's by the "Francfort school" against "counciousness industries", it is not a critical theory which we therefore need, not even à "new critical theory", but a hyper-critical theory ... still to be invented ! Or may be, as the Swiss writer Max Frisch recently pleaded, should we urgently look back at the project of the Enlightenment, and thus become aware of the threatening failure of Moral Reason around us, in the media and elsewhere (9).

Pierre-Henri ZOLLER

(translated by Charles HARRISON)

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(7) These observations are the result of a debate carried on within the ARTED (Association Romande pour une Radio-Télévision Démocratique)

(8) J. Ellul, "Le système technicien" (Calmann-Levy, Paris, 1977), p. 348

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